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Dr Darrin Baines

Analysing and targeting customers' preconceived ideas can give your sales a lift.

The widespread use of signs, symbols and other powerful images in modern advertising shows that advertisers are well aware of the potential power of symbolism in communicating their all important messages to their customers.

A cursory glance through any newspaper or magazine reveals scores of adverts with double meanings, designed to communicate on an unconscious level by playing on people's wishes, anxieties and expectations.

Whilst symbols are widely used in modern advertising, there is a wide gulf in opinion about their effectiveness. For some people, the use of symbols plays a major part in influencing customer behaviour.

For others, symbolism is a load of nonsense that is best avoided.

Given the diversity of these views, an exploration of how symbolism can be and is used, as well as looking at the role and importance of symbolism in advertising, is bound to throw up some interesting findings.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

To begin an exploration into the relationship between symbols and the inner workings of the human mind, an understanding of basic human psychology is an absolute must.

Karen Stobbart is a Jungian therapist from the Society of Analytical Psychologists, who agreed to give an expert opinion on the imagery used in a number of leading pharmaceutical ads.

Before dispensing her wisdom, however, Stobbart is quick to differentiate between an image used as a 'sign' and one used as a 'symbol'.

On the one hand, a 'sign' is an image that literally represents what is shown. For example, the Micardis ad probably uses ants as a sign of a hard-working, industrious product. Indeed, the image simply portrays the strapline: "Early morning and still going strong".

A 'symbol', on the other hand, has a secondary meaning, which may not be obvious to all viewers. For example, the use of cherries in the Leavold Pollard Rogan ads may be symbolic, as it does not directly show what it's trying to portray (see page 49).

If you don't know what 'losing your cherry' means, you'll probably miss the point of this ad.

DIFFICULT ASSOCIATIONS

Symbols rely on associations being made between the chosen images and the messages advertisers are trying to communicate. Consequently, symbolism

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SECRETS OF THE MIND

is only effective when the chosen images elicit the necessary connections in the minds of the target customers.

Ad agencies, therefore, face a potential pitfall with the use of symbolism, as images may generate different associations with different people.

A simple example is the Lipostat ad featuring children playing. This image could mean young hearts being strong to some people, whilst others may link the image to treatment being child's play for this product.

Given the range of meanings images may evoke, Stobbart suggests that advertisers should be cautious when using symbolism in their ads, unless their meanings are clearly defined and unambiguous. Indeed, it's better to be safe than sorry.

JUNGIAN THOUGHT

As a member of the Society of Analytical Psychologists, Stobbart is trained in the approach to psychology first developed by Carl Jung. To help in our analysis of pharmaceutical adverts, a discussion of his theories on the operation of the mind may shed some light on things.

According to Jung, we all have conscious and unconscious thoughts. Whilst we are constantly aware of our consciousness, our unconscious minds are hidden from us, outside of everyday experience.

In his work, Jung argued that our unconscious has two parts. One part is our 'personal unconscious', which consists of what we have personally forgotten, repressed, thought, felt and subliminally perceived. This is our private property.

The other part is a deeper level, the 'collective unconscious', which does not develop individually, but is inherited. Although this psychic substrate exists in us all, we are not usually aware of its contents.

Jung argued that we can access the closed areas of our unconscious through a set of universal images, which he refers to as archetypes. Just as iron filings outline the shape of a magnet field, archetypal images translate our hidden thoughts into something recognisable.

Amongst the archetypal images common to all humankind, Jung cited the shadow, the child and the hero.

Through the study of these three forms we are able to access the contents of the collective unconsciousness, which has shaped human behaviour since the dawn of time.

For example, the shadow archetype signifies the side of ourselves we would rather people did not know about. This can be dark, such as a bad temper, or a tendency to shop-lift (even if we have the money available). Alternatively, a tough businessman may want his colleagues to know he helps the homeless at Christmas. This is an example of a hardy character trying not to hide a more caring, softer side.

The hero archetype, on the other hand, ▸▸

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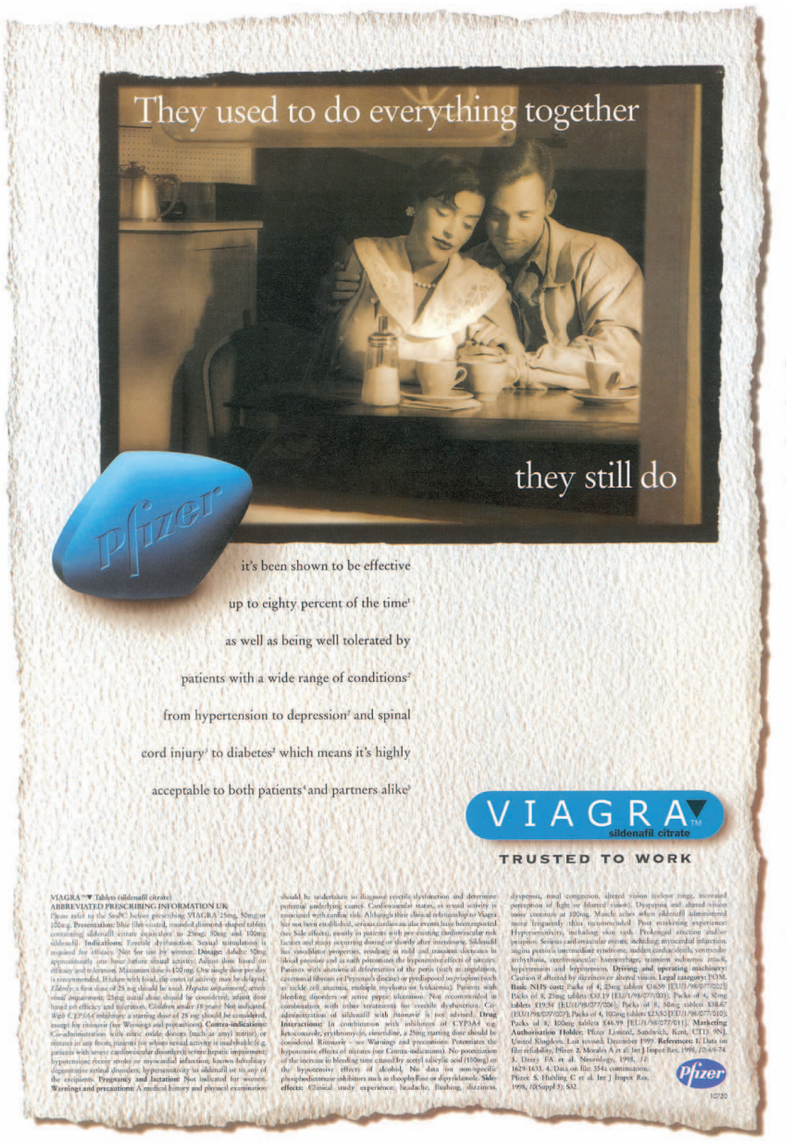
They used to do everything together
they still do
Pfizer
it's been shown to be effective
up to eighty percent of the time[1]
as well as being well tolerated by
patients with a wide range of conditions[2]
from hypertension to depression[3] and spinal
cord injury[4] to diabetes[5] which means it's highly
acceptable to both patients[6] and partners alike[7]
VIAGRA
sildenafil citrate
TRUSTED TO WORK
Pfizer

embodies our most powerful aspirations. When heroes appear in folklore, myths or dreams, they can reveal the manner in which we would ideally like to defeat our enemies, which to a sick person could mean beating a disease.

Alternatively, rescuing a princess can symbolise living happily ever after. To some patients, waking up a prince could mean escaping from depression.

In our conversation, Stobbart stated that, on a simple level, mythical children (such as Peter Pan) represent innocence and/or the desire never to grow old. According to Jungians, the child archetype also personifies the hope and the promise of new beginnings, more fruitful futures.

INTERPRETATION

When encountered for the first time, Jung's idea of archetypes strikes many as complicated or inaccessible.

However, Stobbart's interpretation makes matter simpler.

Jungian psychologists, says Stobbart, have different opinions about what Jung meant by the term 'archetype'.

However, an archetype is not the same thing as a symbol. Confused yet? Here's an example.

An archetype is an outline of a potential. For example, babies are born with a rutting instinct, if you stroke their cheeks they turn their heads in order to receive their mothers' milk.

Therefore, you could argue that children are born with expectations of being fed, which implies that they are born with a 'prototype' mother.

For babies, the experience of mother is literally the experience of feeding. Consequently, images of mother figures are often associated with the feelings of satisfaction, repletion or deprivation, which are commonly connected with being fed (positive) or not receiving the milk we desired as a hungry child (negative).

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

At this point, you may be asking, what has this got to do with pharmaceutical advertising? The answer is that we and our customers are all people.

We all have in-built, unconscious dispositions or inclinations, with related feelings, which we associate with particular archetypes, such as the mother figure. It is through symbols that we can express and access these hidden structures inside our minds.

For instance, an image of a mother can be used symbolically to represent our feelings about the world and whether we will be nourished or left frustrated and waiting like crying babies.

Agencies that use pictures of mums in their ads can either stimulate our conscious, happy (or unhappy) thoughts about our mommies or tap into unconscious, unexpressed feelings of satiation (or neglect). Therefore, in theory, advertisers could use archetypal images to stimulate emotions that make potential customers buy.

However, Stobbart warned that agencies have to be careful when using archetypal images, because not only can they stimulate positive associations between products and emotions, but they can also arouse negative feelings potential customers unconsciously hide.

Consequently, part of an agency's job is to ensure that adverts don't produce emotions other than those required.

PHARMA ADS

Before she commented on the individual ads, Stobbart says that many of the images she examined contained signs not symbols, as their meaning was obvious and unambiguous. Although they tended to use signs, agencies seemed to clearly understand what images appeal to prescribers.

Jacques Cousteau
Jackie was always wary of the water – although it wasn't really the water she was afraid of, it was the fear of having an asthma attack in a public place. But now that Pulmicort has helped to control her asthma, she can take the plunge whenever she likes.
Pulmicort
budesonide
AstraZeneca
Lets them explore the possibilities

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For instance, the Viagra campaign successfully used a picture of a couple to refer to a happy sex life, perhaps that experienced when they were first married.

Indeed, the image clearly signifies that the product is designed to improve quality of life, and counters any suggestions that something so natural, so wholesome should be the subject of jokes and innuendoes.

IMAGE CONFUSION

When looking at the specific pharmaceutical ads, Stobbart said it must be nearly impossible for advertisers to link products with images, as the majority of images have so many possible associations.

For example, she asked what connections were intended in the Zithromax ads? Does the drug rescue patients from pain? Do sufferers see the world through a plastic shield? Or do they look out and see a threatening world?

The ads Karen studied, therefore, confirmed that images may be interpreted in different ways, depending upon the experiences, viewpoints and psychological make-up of those viewing them.

ARCHETYPES AND ADS

Given the importance of Jung's work on the link between symbols and human behaviour, Stobbart examined a number of ads which could be designed to represent archetypal figures such as the child, the hero and the shadow.

Firstly, the Pulmicort ads, which could be read as a representation of the child archetype, suggesting new beginnings, more fruitful futures.

On looking at the images, Stobbart believed they implied that the drug freed children to explore life more fully.

However, the association between children and improved life options was more descriptive than symbolic.

Next, the Uriplan ad, which could be seen as containing an archetypal hero. On an unconscious level, Stobbart suggested that the advertisers could be trying to create the fantasy that users of this product would be like the strong figure portrayed in the ad.

Consequently, there is some evidence that the image was used symbolically to generate deeper, positive feelings in prescribers.

However, this evidence was not conclusive, and the bandanna-wearing patient could simply be a well-informed consumer who knows what he wants from his life and his doctor.

Finally, we discussed the Zithromax ad, which could represent the shadow archetype. After contemplating, Stobbart was in two minds about this one.

On the one hand, she thought that the shadow archetype was implied because the figures in the ad were quite threatening.

On the other, she thought that a bit of shadow might have been used to make the image more striking. Consequently, she withheld her final judgement.

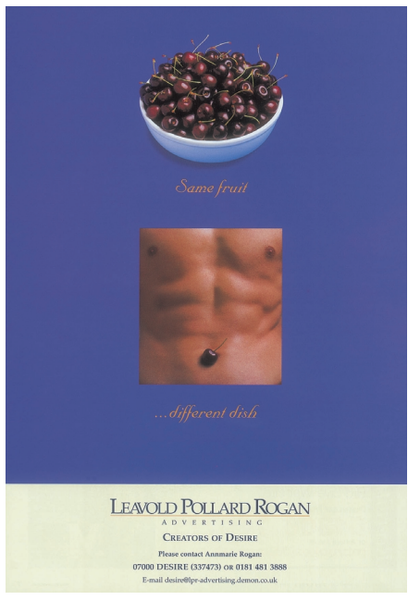
POST-MATCH ANALYSIS

After examination of the pharma ads, Stobbart drew some conclusions.

Upon reflection, she was impressed with many of the ads and that there was some evidence that advertisers had used symbols. For example, children in ads symbolise hope, health and possibilities for the future.

However, the ways that advertisers tend to use archetypal images often make them signs rather than symbols, as their meaning is obvious and not hidden.

From the work she saw, Stobbart believed that agencies already know how to make effective ads. As a psychologist, she could not think of ways in which they could be improved.



Nevertheless, she warned that images often have unconscious associations, both formed within the individual and as part of the collective unconscious.

In response, Stobbart surmised that research done by advertisers before the launch of their campaigns probably identified any damaging, unconscious reactions that they hadn't been envisaged during the design stage.

At the end of our interview, Stobbart pointed out that pharma advertisers seem well aware of the sign and symbols that relate to our fantasies about health.

However, if creatives are not careful, the ads they design could betray their own fantasy lives.

WHERE NOW?

This analysis of pharmaceutical adverts suggests the following. Firstly, that by harnessing appropriate signs and symbols, pharma ads can be effective at communicating product messages. Secondly, these ads usually minimise the ambiguity associated with secondary symbolic meanings.

Consequently, evidence suggests that symbolism is used selectively by the industry, with ads being based upon what works, rather than on naïve theories of what stimulate prescribers' minds.

The message is clear: pharma ads are effective because advertisers know how to reassure us that our wishes to be healthy can come true.

THE AUTHOR
Dr Darrin Baines is the director of medM Limited. He can be contacted at info@medm.co.uk